

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, April 2, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

PSALM 68:4,6

“Sing unto God; sing praises to His Name,
the God Who brings the lonely home.”

THE HOMESICKNESS OF THE SOUL

There are few things more fascinating and more mysterious to the student of natural history than the wonderful instinct of direction displayed by birds and beasts and fish. It is sometimes called “the homing instinct.” What it is no one fully understands.

Do you know that the golden plover winters in the Hawaiian Islands, but turns in spring toward home? And where is home? - Nova Scotia, almost 6,000 miles away! One 2,000-mile leg of this journey, the plover flies nonstop, covering the distance in only 48 hours, at an average speed of more than 40 miles an hour!

The Newfoundland seal finds its own baby seal by coming up through the ice floe to the very hole beside which her offspring lies. With a thousand ice floes, all looking the same from underneath, the mother seal, who goes as far as 40 miles in search of food, returns unerringly to her baby seal.

In some such wonderful way man, too, has got a deep and universal instinct for home. There is something within each one of us that binds us with invisible ties to the sights and sounds of childhood and youth. There must be many a person far from his birthplace who often feels in his heart the tug of homesickness. Often into his mind's eye come pictures of home, the gladiolus and the sunflowers in the back garden, the deep pool at the bend of the creek where his father helped him catch his first trout, the ravishing smell of new-baked bread and pies as mother demonstrated her superb skill in the kitchen, the old church where he first made profession of his faith in Christ, and took upon his lips the bread and wine of the Holy Sacrament.

It is little wonder that John Howard Payne, catching a sight, through the unshuttered window, of a poor family sitting in simple happiness around their fireplace, while he had made himself homeless, was inspired to go back to his garret room and write,

“Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home.”

How strong, how binding are these invisible ties of home!

I have read somewhere that in the course of the Civil War the opposing armies came within sight of each other one evening just as twilight was deepening. With only a river separating their camps, they bivouacked for the night. As darkness settled in, a regimental band

on the Union side began to play. It struck up The Star-Spangled Banner. It was answered by the band of a Southern regiment with Dixie. And so, things went on for a while, tune answering tune. At last, a happy thought moved the Union band.

It played Home, Sweet Home. One after another, the various bands in both armies took up the strain; and when it was finished, a voice exclaimed, "Three cheers for home!" And, forgetting for a moment all the things that had made them enemies, and united by a sentiment that is stronger than death, those soldiers, who, on the morrow, were to be flung at each other's throats, joined in cheering the homes from which they came, but to which they might never return. Such is the deep, universal instinct for home.

Nor is it in any way strange that this deep love of home, and this tug of homesickness are so often linked up with thoughts of God. Deep in the heart of man there is a homing instinct, profound, persistent, ineradicable, which he often ignores, and might even deny, but which is nonetheless real. Man experiences a homesickness of the soul, even though he may not be able to put a name to it. It is that haunting, wistful recognition that life can only be strong and happy and meaningful and complete when it finds God; for as Wordsworth put it, "God... is our Home."

In this connection, I want to state two facts of human nature which I think are undeniable;

1. There is something in man which earth can never satisfy. Many people mistakenly believe that if only they had this or that coveted thing they would always be happy. But the evidence does not bear out this belief.

No one will deny that to lack enough money to meet the simple needs of life is to miss happiness; but on the other hand, it is quite untrue to suppose that a lot of money necessarily brings with it a lot of joy. Wealth and woe often walk hand in hand. Success and sorrow are often next-door neighbors. Jay Gould, the famous millionaire of a past generation, who died possessing a fabulous fortune, summed up his life in these words - "I suppose I am the most miserable devil on earth."

Some people set their sights on a coveted position and believe that enduring satisfaction for them would come if they could only get that sought-after promotion, with its inviting salary increase. They work and scheme and plan, only to discover that the satisfaction of "arriving" soon fades. When Benjamin Disraeli, twice Prime Minister of Great Britain, reviewed his life, he said rather cynically, "Youth is a mistake; manhood a struggle; old age a regret." And to think that he had spent years clawing his way to the top of the heap!

Fame is another will-o'-the-wisp which beckons others on. John Milton called fame "that last infirmity of noble mind." A brilliant actress whose performance in the theatre one evening had brought her the usual standing ovation at curtain call, was found later in her dressing room, weeping uncontrollably. When asked what was wrong, she blurted out, "I'm getting old, and I cannot expect to have many more experiences such as I've had this evening!" The calendar is the deadly weapon against those whose only ambition in life is worldly fame.

Pleasure is the goal of other people. The art of life, as they conceive it, is to squeeze from every moment the utmost enjoyment it will yield. But so often that very pleasure turns to gall and bitterness at the last. Lord Byron, that outstanding poet of the 19th century, drifted, in the quest of pleasure, from one woman to another, from this amusement to that, and died, an old man, at thirty-six, far from home, and saying of himself on his last birthday,

My days are in the yellow leaf;
The flowers and fruits of love are gone;
The worm, the canker, and the grief
Are mine alone!

And in our generation, we have only to think of that literary genius, Ernest Hemingway, who, in 1953 won a Pulitzer Prize for The Old Man and the Sea, and in 1954 was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. At the age of 62 he had drunk as deeply as any ever could at the well of sensual pleasure, but with overweight, high blood pressure, diabetes and a corroded liver, his candle had burned out, and he knew it, and there was nothing left to live for. He had long before given up belief in God; so, one Sunday morning he put on his red robe, and padded down the carpeted stairway of his Idaho home, which faced the magnificent Sawtooth Mountains. Choosing his favorite 12-gauge shotgun, he pushed a shell into each barrel and carefully lowered the gun butt to the floor. Then he placed the cold metal inside his mouth and tripped both triggers.

Again, some people pursue physical health, and, of course, God expects us to take care of our body which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Cults have grown up which make the fitness of the human body a perfect obsession. But let us never forget that there are spiritual maladies which no harmony of the body can ever cure, and which, if uncured, will often rob the body of its health as well.

I think of a medical doctor who had given up conventional medical practice in order to advise people on how not to be ill, and who was himself such a picture of physical fitness that folk came from miles around to consult him about the basic principles of health. But one morning he came to his minister's door in an agony of heart, to tell of a deep malady in his own soiled soul, and to seek advice upon a moral problem which was grave indeed.

I say it again -- there is something in you and me which even the best things in life cannot satisfy -- a longing, a hunger, a heartache which nothing material seems able to meet.

There is something in man which earth can never satisfy.

And here is the second fact:

2. There is in every one of us a nostalgia for God. That is to say, God has put in the heart of each one of us a longing for Himself. The majority of people do not understand this; they just know that there are times when they want to be quiet, times when they want to be alone, times when the calendar, or the stars, or the death of a loved one speaks to them. They hunger and they thirst -- but for what?

Did not St. Augustine, in his immortal prayer, put it so finely? -- "Oh God Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."

Johann Bojer, in his novel entitled The Emigrants, portrays the life of a young Norwegian lad, Morten, who sails to America, and by dint of hard work, becomes a relatively wealthy man. But he is never fully satisfied; he keeps longing to see the deep fjords and the rugged hills of Norway again. After many years he does return to his native Norway, only to realize with sadness that he just doesn't fit in as once he did. So, he returns to the U.S.A. for good. On the last page of the book, Bojer attempts to sum up the position. He writes, "Morten lay by the open window meditating. He thought of the old tailor who had come home seven times, and had always gone back because happiness seemed invariably to be on the other side of the ocean... If you came back, you wanted to leave again. If you went away, you longed to come back. Wherever you were, you could hear the call of the homeland like the notes of a herdsman's horn far away in the hills. You had one home out there, and one over here, and yet, you were an alien in both places!"

Isn't that so true of modern man? Whether he knows it or not, he is homesick. He knows he has one foot in time and another in eternity, and he doesn't feel quite at home in either. Sometimes he is afraid of both. It is the homesickness of the soul -- the soul longing, almost unconsciously, to get back to God and to God's purpose for life. How well we know it!

I sometimes think that is why Jesus, in His crowning parable, pictured the prodigal son as an exile and an alien in a far country. It was the memory of home that filled his heart. It was home for which his poor soul was crying. He saw the farm nestling among the hills, and the weary oxen coming home at eventide, and the happy circle gathered round the fire, and the father crying to heaven for the wanderer. And he was homesick!

God has made us to be truly at home only in Himself. Our homesickness of the soul, our deep yearnings after goodness, our times of loneliness, are but the roads that lead back to God's great heart of love. I wonder are you enduring a self-imposed exile from God? You may recall how in the days of youth you looked into the eyes of Christ and heard His call to commit your life to Him. You saw Him dying in your place on that cruel Cross to save you; and you heard Him say, "Come to Me, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). But as the years have gone by, somehow the vision has faded, the flame has died upon the altar. Gradually, imperceptibly, Christ's standards have been toned down; and perhaps you look back somewhat wistfully to what you once were in the glad morning of your day.

"Sing me a song of a lad that is gone,
Say, could that lad be I?"

But today, out in the far country, in a single moment of time, you may come home -- home to a Father's love and a Father's forgiveness.

Have you ever noticed this, that whenever you meet a true saint of God, you become aware of two things about him or her? At one moment, you feel "how natural and at home he is." And

the next instant you say to yourself, “This person is an exile — an alien; he doesn’t belong here at all.” You notice this, for example, in the Apostle Paul. How busy he is in relating the Gospel to the practical problems of daily life for the Christian; and then, in the next breath, he expresses a yearning to be “at home with the Lord” in heaven. This homesickness for God and heaven is a precious, divine gift. It won’t make you less keen to serve your fellow humans here on earth, but it will be a constant reminder to you that the most permanent dwelling earth provides is a tent; and that at any moment the word may come for you to pull up stakes. As the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, we are indeed “aliens and strangers on earth” (11:13).

Your interest in heaven may expose you, of course, to the charge of “other-worldliness.” People who have made the “social gospel” the whole Gospel are very free with that charge. Ignore it! You know that as a Christian you must work for justice so that Christ’s standards may be put into operation in every sphere of human life and activity; but you also know that the “new Jerusalem” we shall one day see is “not made with hands,” but is “eternal in the heavens.” Its “builder and maker is God”! (Hebrews 11:10).

And then, one day down the future, you will find that God has not mocked you by putting this homesickness in your heart; for did not Jesus assure us that for those who love and trust Him, when there comes “sunset and evening star,” there will be the eternal home? Did He not say to His disciples on that night of tender, last farewell, that in His Father’s house, or home, there would be “many mansions”? (John 124:1). To the Christian “death” is but a “going home,”¹ as the old Negro spiritual so finely expresses it.

Robert Browning, in his beautiful poem entitled The Gathering Place, says that he does not think Heaven will necessarily be a place with streets of gold and gates of pearl. This is our pictorial, childhood view. But, says Browning,

In the afterward of years
It is a more familiar place;
A home unhurt by sighs or tears,
Where waiteth many a well-known face --
Where none are sick, or poor, or lone,
The place where we shall find our own.

And I think Browning is right. Heaven will be a place where there will be familiar hands and kindly faces, and “those whom we have loved long since and lost awhile.”

Lord Baden Powell, the founder of the Boy Scout movement, is buried in Kenya in East Africa. On the very simple tombstone there are just the words

“Robert Baden Powell,
Chief Scout of the World,”

and the dates of his birth and death; and then underneath, a circle with a dot in the center of it. Every Boy Scout knows that that circle with a dot in the center is the Scout sign for

“I have gone home.”

Could anything be more fittingly inscribed upon the gravestone of any Christian than just that? For that is what death is for a Christian man or woman -- simply a quiet “going home.”

Well, what do you say to all this? For myself, I would say very eagerly, like that man in the Gospels, “Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24). For, speaking personally, I have no hope whatsoever either in this world or in the world to come except in Christ and Him crucified. And neither have you.

I hold Jesus up before you again this morning; I present Him to you as your only Savior from sin and death.

He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good;
That we might go at last to Heaven,
Saved by His precious blood.

Turn to Him just now and see the lights which are forever burning their eternal welcome in the windows of the Father’s home. And then, when “the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, the fever of life over, and your work done,” you shall see Him face to face, and you shall serve Him in the brighter light of Heaven.

AMEN.